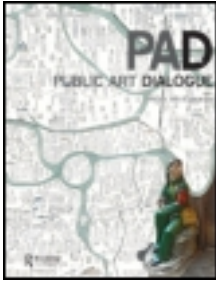


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THE MURALS OF EL SALVADOR: RECONSTRUCTION, HISTORICAL MEMORY AND WHITEWASHING

Rachel Heidenry

Walls define El Salvador. Painted in vivid colors, yet constructed as fortresses, walls wrap around street corners shielding homes and restricting access. Littered with advertisements, political propaganda, murals and graffiti, the nation's walls also reveal tensions, propagate values and narrate everyday life. In a country still negotiating a brutal civil war (1980–92), murals stand out because of their intention, history and cultural proximity to post-war struggle. More than 20 years since the close of the war, El Salvador's search for collective identity still actively defines its socio-political life and, consequently, public walls.

Despite this, Salvadoran mural painting has never been internationally studied, celebrated or defined. It has existed for decades, influenced by Mexico's legacy while deeply reflecting its own country's cultural and political identities. Since the 1990s, painted symbols, themes and motifs specific to Salvadoran history have become active material markers in the struggle for nationhood. Mural painting has become a leftist tool to reclaim local identity, subvert contemporary struggle and exert political power. Pieced together, El Salvador's murals reveal attempts to construct a shared cultural identity, as the nation actively defines, interprets and debates the nation's historical memory.

This article provides an introduction to mural painting in El Salvador. While it touches on formalist attributes such as style and iconography, it will focus on post-war mural painting's relationship with historical memory philosophy and the politics of whitewashing. The article concludes with a discussion of contemporary Salvadoran mural projects, demonstrating how the public wall in El Salvador remains a crucial object for propagating memory, political ideology and national identity.

THE MURAL, SALVADORAN HISTORY AND HISTORICAL MEMORY

To feel the legacy and contemporary momentum of Salvadoran mural painting, one must begin at the National University in San Salvador (U.E.S.). Dating from

the early 1990s, these oldest revolutionary murals still grip the walls, surrounding the campus with portraits of martyred students and national heroes (Figure 1). U.E.S. marks a rare space in El Salvador where murals can be both provocative and safe. Stencils of Che Guevara and Oscar Romero are painted outside academic buildings, a portrait of an indigenous woman sorting coffee beans stamps the parking lot and a mural of *guerrilleros* thrusting their rifles in the air occupies a wall outside the student center. While some murals are permanent, others will be momentary – walls acting as canvases for art students honing their craft or student organizations promoting a cause.

At their most basic definition, murals are works of art created on a wall surface. While perspective, scale and composition certainly contribute to their historical and aesthetic significance, what enables a mural is its inherent relation to the public sphere and its contributing political, social and environmental factors.¹ As structures enclosing a space, walls are innately tied to a building's function and purpose and are consequently imbued with identities that align with its spatial politics. As evident at U.E.S., murals become part of this historiography and perform layered extensions of an individual or community's existence, identity and values. Created in the public sphere (defined as a set of institutions where citizens engage in debate), murals and other forms of public art become innately



Figure 1. University students. *En Memoria de Nuestros Martires y Nuestros Caidos*. University of El Salvador, San Salvador. c. 2003. Industrial paints. Photograph by the author, 2011.

connected to societal discourse, allowing both compromise and conflict to act out on walls.

In El Salvador it would take decades for public, populist murals to exist on the nation's streets. In her 2011 book, *Procesos del Arte en El Salvador* (the first comprehensive art historical publication on Salvadoran art), Astrid Bahamond Panamá explains that the Salvadoran artistic community in the nineteenth and early-mid twentieth centuries was heavily influenced and defined by European trends. The few murals that existed up until the late twentieth century almost exclusively focused on religious or Euro-centric historical scenes decorating the domes of government institutions or national theaters, such as *El Teatro de Santa Ana*.² Following the Mexican Revolution (1910–20), however, the Salvadoran artistic community switched from a preoccupation with Europe to a fascination with Mexico, whose iconography and ideology Salvadorans could readily relate.³

As the century progressed, many artists traveled to Mexico for their artistic training. This included Camilo Minero (1917–2005), the father of Salvadoran mural painting, whose study led to an appreciation of muralism and other popular artistic traditions, such as printmaking. Minero returned to El Salvador in 1960 and was appointed Director of the *Academia de Bellas Artes* where he taught painting and drawing.⁴ More than any other Salvadoran artist, Minero was responsible for bringing the theory and techniques of Mexican mural painting into El Salvador and for teaching those artists who would later use mural painting as a tool in the nation's post-war reconstruction.⁵ Consequently, Salvadoran mural painting is a direct descendent of Mexico's revolutionary mural movement, in which artists sought to establish legitimacy for the political left, while reconstructing the country in accordance to their ideological values.

Despite this artistic burgeoning and academic interest throughout the first half of the twentieth century, public, populist murals could still not exist on the country's streets. Deeply set hierarchies and political oppression ruled in El Salvador.⁶ With the rise of popular movements and guerrilla organizing in the 1960s–70s,⁷ the military government and conservative elite launched an aggressive campaign against the left, leading to public assassinations, massacres and organized death squads. In 1980, following the assassination of Oscar Romero, the archbishop of San Salvador who was a public proponent for the liberation of the poor, a coalition of five leftist guerrilla groups formed the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN),⁸ and together launched an offensive against military rule.

As the country descended into violent armed conflict, walls were used for public communication on both sides of the political spectrum. For the right, slogans were intimidation tactics naming wanted rebels.⁹ And for the left, the anonymous and quick nature of graffiti became one of the only safe methods for

demanding rights or proclaiming injustice. In *Memories in Mosaic*, an opposition leader recalls the streets of San Salvador during the war:

“Down with the police! Long live the Revolution!” “The people will not be silenced by tanks and machine guns!” And the other one that appeared one day, “Come, Lord. Socialism is not enough!” Every day we would see the new writing on the walls of San Salvador, graffiti spreading like vines on the streets.¹⁰

Another factor, given its proximity, timeliness and revolutionary ties, is the Nicaraguan Revolution (1974–79). Many Salvadoran artists and intellectuals spent the civil war in exile, including Camilo Minero who became an active participant in Nicaragua’s mural movement.¹¹

After 12 years of violent civil war, the United Nations supervised a truce between the FMLN and the reigning right-wing party, the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA). Despite these Peace Accords, the tensions and disparity that initiated the civil war remained. An estimated 75,000 Salvadorans had been killed, with countless wounded, disappeared and tortured. One year after the signing, the legislative assembly passed an amnesty law shielding perpetrators from prosecution for their role in wartime atrocities. Meanwhile, one-fifth of the population had fled the country. The traditional elite still held power and the poor remained impoverished.

With the country largely in ruins, citizens were left to recollect and interpret who they were as individual communities and as a nation. One of the few victories for the left was freedom of expression. Inspired by newfound political participation, progressive Salvadorans continued using walls as communication, with the inconsistency of the 1992 Peace Accords igniting a leftist campaign against forgetting and coming to serve as the driving force behind post-war Salvadoran mural painting.

Consequently, the crucial difference separating the Mexican and Nicaraguan mural movements from El Salvador is that the other revolutions were successful. There was no winner in El Salvador, and therefore no mandated opportunity to create change.¹² As a result, Salvadoran mural painting follows a historical trajectory of political activism, struggle for representation and populism. Rather than one unified mural movement, individual artists, organized communities and student groups actively embraced the art form as a grassroots method of commemoration, reconstruction and collective unification.

HISTORICAL MEMORY

Historical memory is crucial to the understanding of Salvadoran mural painting. The philosophy is rooted in the desire and demand to remember, or, more

poignantly, to not forget. In an interview, Cruz Portal, a professor of English at the University of Central America in El Salvador (U.C.A.), defined historical memory:

Historical memory is the promise that an individual or social group strives for, by wishing that specific recent political and social events that marked profound changes in a determined society are not forgotten; it seeks that the most outstanding facts and events are remembered in the collective memory of that society, but, more than anything, it looks that no events are repeated. In the Salvadoran context, historical memory works so that specific political events do not stay in impunity, nor are forgotten, and that justice is reached.¹³

Portal's definition flows directly from the inconsistency of the Peace Accords and subsequent amnesty, underscoring Salvadorans' concept of historical memory as a practice to insure that the civil war is not repeated or forgotten and is an active component of Salvadoran collective identity.¹⁴

Elizabeth Jelin, an Argentinian Human Rights scholar, further explores historical memory within this context of identity. In her 2003 book, *State Repression and the Struggles for Memory*, she writes, "Memories are to be understood as subjective processes anchored in experiences and in symbolic and material markers and are the objects of disputes, conflicts, and struggles."¹⁵ Within these material markers are signposts, which Jelin defines as icons in which memories and identities are fixed.¹⁶ Murals are one example of material markers, acting as containers for images, while signposts become the tangible manifestations of historical memory, the symbols and figures that communicate meaning.

Jelin's scholarship emphasizes historical memory's innate connection to public expression, particularly following periods of violent repression. During such times, memories are often suppressed, only released when citizens feel safe in their public voices. Jelin also emphasizes that effective expression of memory requires receivers – a willingness to listen and engage from the other side. Because of mural painting's direct relation to the public sphere, reception is inherent. Once activated by sight, public murals act as expressions of memory that continuously speak and engage viewers. Furthermore, unlike films or exhibitions that require spaces and equipment, murals are accessible, inexpensive and inclusive – and every Salvadoran community contains walls.

The public expression of memory, Jelin theorizes, becomes the basis for community. Therefore, acts of commemoration enable Salvadorans to express individual memories that in turn support collective memories and contribute to the construction of a shared identity. While historical memory, like murals, may seem succinct and direct, what makes historical memory and its resulting material markers so captivating is its lack of concreteness. Historical memory is not

homogenous, as no one will have the exact same memory. Likewise, murals remain open to interpretation with few guarantees of preservation. Both murals and memories are open to debate, both are fragile and both can vanish.

POST-WAR SALVADORAN MURAL PAINTING: THEMES AND TENSIONS

The leader in artistic reconstruction in post-war El Salvador was a collective called *La Asociación Salvadoreña de Trabajadores del Arte y la Cultura* (A.S.T.A.C.). Formed in 1983 and led by artist Isaías Mata,¹⁷ who was trained by Camilo Minero, A.S.T.A.C. traveled to Salvadoran communities following the war to paint murals with locals. With the country in a critical moment of rebuilding, hundreds of small, rural communities were in the process of organizing. Consequently, mural participants were almost exclusively supporters or members of the FMLN who sought to further legitimize their place within Salvadoran political society (Figure 2).

Working in collaboration with artists or independently, the masses established the faces and symbols that would define communities' collective identities – murals becoming an extension of new public activism. In this stage of



Figure 2. Isaías Mata y Colectivo A.S.T.A.C. *La Memoria Historia del Presente*. El Paisnal, San Salvador. 2006. Industrial paints. Photograph by the author, 2012.

mural painting the two most important functions were to remember the martyrs and massacres of the war and to express hopes for the future of El Salvador.¹⁸ This focus worked to reclaim national historical figures and wartime events, thus remembering what the oligarchical and militarized society attempted to forget.

Salvadorans largely began painting what they already knew: the folk. The dominant themes centered on portraiture, painted from official identity photographs of martyrs; the Salvadoran landscape, a volcano or mountain nearly always marking a given community; and Catholic iconography.¹⁹ These three themes would be molded and transformed to create an iconographic vocabulary to express collective memories.

The central icon became Oscar Romero, San Salvador's martyred archbishop. In *Art Under Duress*, curator Marilyn Zeitlan points out, "Each of the repopulations has at least one mural with a portrait of Romero. In Perquín he looks down from the façade of a church, a strong image that seems to guard over the village square."²⁰ A.S.T.A.C. artists Isaías Mata and Álvaro Sermeño have publically written on the importance of Romero's icon and consistently use his image in mural projects. In a 2010 essay titled "La influencia de Monseñor Romero en las artes plásticas," Mata writes,

Archbishop Romero is an image that belongs to the heritage of Salvadorans. His image is part of the Salvadoran socio-cultural identity, and of the nations and people who fight for peace and a world full of justice, life, freedom, truth, fairness and respect for the dignity of men and women.²¹

Indeed, the visibility of Romero's image is vast, found in nearly every Salvadoran community. This adoration is so deep-rooted that he is frequently depicted as the Christ figure, symbolically representing the salvation of El Salvador.

One mural encapsulates this symbolic reverence. In the community of San Ramón, in Mejicanos, San Salvador, a mural of Romero is painted at the entrance of a Christian-based community, *El Pueblo de Dios en Camino* (Figure 3). The mural is a detailed portrait of Archbishop Romero, his eyes peering straight out. His image is placed in the Salvadoran landscape, indicated by the volcano that defines San Salvador's skyline and under which San Ramón is situated. Delicately painted grape vines, representing the Eucharist of Christ, wrap around Romero's shoulders, filling the lower half of the mural and making it appear as though he is growing out of the ground. In the top right corner, the image of Alfonso Acevedo, a local community leader who was assassinated during the war, is also painted. And to the left of Romero is a quote spoken in March 1980, the month of his assassination: "I offer my blood for the redemption and resurrection of El Salvador...Let my blood be the seed of freedom."



Figure 3. El Pueblo de Dios en Camino. *Semilla de Libertad*. San Ramón, Mejicanos. c. 1998. Industrial paints. Photograph by the author, 2010.

Here Romero, using the words spoken shortly before his death, is directly seen as the savior. Using the language of Christ, Romero offers his life for the redemption and resurrection of the nation, with his blood representing the seed to the new, liberated El Salvador. Additionally, the inclusion of Alfonso Acevedo, the local symbol of resistance, marks the mural as a community statement, thus declaring *El Pueblo de Dios en Camino's* liberation as one entrenched in the commitment to and memory of Romero.

While Romero's proliferation may make him the Salvadoran Che Guevara, what underscores his icon's uniqueness lies in his profession: a priest. Exuding neither sexiness nor revolutionary fervor, Romero instead emits hope and tolerance — underscoring El Salvador's murals as more linked to liberation theology and social justice movements than communist zeal. With that said, Romero's image is frequently seen alongside revolutionary leaders, including Che and Farabundo Martí, emphasizing the mass appropriation of his image as it crosses political spectrums into both Catholic social teaching and socialism.

Irrevocably, Romero became the foundational figure in the construction of leftist Salvadoran identity. The next important factor was space. As material markers, post-war murals were intrinsically intertwined with memory, land,

materiality and death. Marking individual sites with murals or other forms of public artistic expressions drew out memories of events and subsequently empowered these spaces to act as embodiments of collective memory. Thus, massacre sites, such as Arcatao, Nuevo Copapayo, El Mozote or the National University in San Salvador become enabled through their muraled walls, acting as testimony to the event, witness to lives lost and public communication of remembrance.

Because nearly all murals during this time were painted with community members who had little (or no) access to formal education, let alone art history or mural technique, these projects were highly didactic and often simple in nature. The most common imagery depicted local martyrs in the Salvadoran landscape surrounded by farmers and children happily going about their day (Figure 4). These murals sought to establish communal memory by identifying the figures and events integral to local history. Scenes of everyday life showing the land cultivated and no longer ravaged by war, children in school and laborers at work further communicated stability and future prosperity.

In contrast to these sunny landscapes was the direct portrayal of suffering. A mural commemorating the Rio Sumpul Massacre in Arcatao, Chalatenango, for instance, includes an image of a soldier tossing a young girl in the air and stabbing her in the back with a machete (Figure 5). Rather than abstract suffering, this open



Figure 4. Equipo Maíz. Cinquera, Cabañas. c. 1998. Industrial paints. Photograph by the author, 2012.



Figure 5. *Masacre del Sumpul*. Arcatao, Chalatenango. c. 2008. Acrylic. Photograph by the author, 2012.

reference to death reflects the Catholic tradition, where images of martyrdom and crucifixion are overt.²²

Unfortunately, many post-war Salvadoran murals no longer exist. Years of heavy rainy seasons, direct sunlight and petty defacement have damaged the unprotected walls. This ephemeral nature is a critical component of mural philosophy. Because of the medium's direct relation to the public sphere and community sentiment, decay and conflict are inherent. Unless painted in enclosed spaces or with more permanent mediums, such as fresco or mosaic, a public mural cannot be expected to exist forever.²³

A more common method of destruction is whitewashing. As seen in Nicaragua, revolutionary murals are often short-lived. When the Sandinistas lost power in 1990, the new government enacted a massive mural destruction campaign, despite, according to art historian David Kunzle, a law passed by the Sandinista government "declaring as many murals (and martyr monuments) as they could name to be historic patrimony, and therefore untouchable."²⁴ This vulnerability is perhaps Nicaraguan and Salvadoran murals greatest similarity. Furthermore, the incessant threat of whitewashing underscores the power ascribed to public walls, the opportunity murals have in national reconstruction and public art's potential to act as voice.

Across El Salvador, murals and other forms of painted propaganda often have a lifespan of election years. An unofficial duty of newly elected politicians is to paint their municipality in their party's respective colors and remove public memorials that do not match their political ideology. The two largest parties have remained: ARENA and the FMLN. The oldest post-war murals continue to exist in FMLN strongholds, such as rural Chalatenango, where ARENA has little chance of securing the popular vote.

Unlike the FMLN, however, ARENA predominantly favors blank walls — monuments to the party's policy of forgetting. The common slogan of elected officials is, "*Borrón y cuenta nuevo*" (literally translated "erase and tell again" or metaphorically "let bygones be bygones"). To investigate the nation's history, ARENA believes, is to detract from the pressing demands of the present. Thus, forgetting is promoted as a democratic necessity in building a new, peaceful El Salvador. This philosophy purposely disavows the trauma many Salvadorans still live and seeks to establish a contemporary identity that includes little to no memory of national conflict.²⁵

Accordingly, mural painting's direct relationship to historical memory exists in opposition to the right's policy of forgetting. Icons, figures and symbols became charged images asserting claim over El Salvador's past, present and future. It was natural, then, for ARENA to respond to the left's public proclamation of remembrance with whitewashing. While unfortunate, this play of mural painting and erasure became representative of the struggle for socio-political power and national identity and speaks to the activation of public space for debate.

Despite this erasure, post-war murals in El Salvador have contributed to the country's contemporary history. Reflecting the theories of French historian Pierre Nora, the use of memory for reconstruction is based in an image of difference, what Nora calls mirror-memory. He writes, "It is no longer genesis that we seek but instead the decipherment of what we are in the light of what we are no longer."²⁶ For the Salvadoran empowered with a political voice, historical memory was (and continues to be) used to compare and contrast life before and after the war. Before the war, one was killed for speaking out. After, one was relatively free to participate in social activism. Before the war, images were hidden and only subversive acts of graffiti making were performed. After, murals were painted across the country. For the Salvadoran left, the right to expression is what supports historical memory because it is situated against the memory of the inability to express. Thus, the act of painting became an essential component of community formation and political participation and a medium through which the average citizen could engage in public dialogue. The murals themselves became sites of memory creating a visual vocabulary of symbols, themes and iconography that has sought to define what El Salvador was, is and should become.

CONTEMPORARY MURAL PAINTING IN EL SALVADOR

Now more than 20 years past the 1992 Peace Accords, El Salvador and its murals have significantly evolved. The critical evolution of Salvadoran mural painting can be witnessed through a handful of themes. The first continues with historical memory but incorporates a greater ideological influence from international community mural movements. These works not only seek to remember the civil war, but El Salvador's entire history. A second observation is the changing face of mural commissioners. Rather than staying within the confines of community organizations and artist collectives, murals are being officially sought after for the construction of historical and cultural patrimony by political figures and cultural institutions, including President Mauricio Funes and San Salvador Mayor, Norman Quijano. Mural painting has also diminished its exclusively leftist leaning origins and has become a tool used by conservative political forces for the benefit of tourism.

COMMUNITY INITIATIVES, GRAFFITI AND TOURISM

Community mural movements in El Salvador, highly influenced by pioneering artists in the United States, have brought a new energy to the Salvadoran artistic community. The leader in this contemporary mural movement is an open-art school based in Perquín, Morazán called Walls of Hope. Argentinean muralist, Claudia Bernardi, and three local artists, América Argentina Vaquerano, Claudia Verence Flores Escolero and Rosa del Carmen Argueta, lead the organization. Their work in El Salvador has proven most successful in engaging with larger community mural movement ideology, appropriately modified to the local experience.

Beginning each project with a group meeting, the artists actively develop the murals' concepts, images and purpose alongside community members — the active consideration of the participant central to their philosophy. Unlike post-war murals that directly referenced the war, Walls of Hope's work encourages participants to reflect on the traditions and narratives that are central to each community's history. In a 2012 interview, Vaquerano explained the purpose of the murals:

The idea is to try to join the ideas of one sector with those of another — and to try to reconstruct the ideas that the people consider beautiful and that are worth the pain of this municipal's history. We work to recuperate historical memory, the oral traditions of the grandfathers and grandmothers, and to fertilize and promote reconciliation.²⁷

The murals that cover Perquín are full of historical scenes from the community's past that include indigenous traditions and folklore (Figure 6). When the war is the subject, the group chooses indirect references, such as reunification, rather than overt images like falling bombs that retain the trauma. This is a crucial component of the murals' longevity. While Morazán is a FMLN stronghold, the region is still politically divided and in recent years ARENA has gained political momentum. Accordingly, Walls of Hope insures that mural proposals are granted approval from all sides of the political spectrum before initiating painting. This dialogue (and debate) creates murals that all sectors feel part of and provides protection from whitewashing.²⁸

Aligned with Walls of Hope's work is the emerging theme of indigenism in Salvadoran mural painting. From both sides of the political spectrum, indigenous culture is being recognized as a definitive component of Salvadoran identity. Public murals celebrating native traditions and indigenous leaders are prominent, particularly in western departments where a 1932 massacre took place and several archaeological sites exist. Yet, perhaps the most innovative mural initiative spawned by community mural movements lies in violence prevention and youth engagement, with artists and non-profit organizations seeking to provide alternative spaces for at-risk youth.



Figure 6. Walls of Hope. *Memorias de los Niños de Ayer*. Perquín, Morazán, 2008. Acrylic. Photograph by the author, 2012.

It is impossible to discuss this initiative without mentioning the contemporary emergence of graffiti²⁹ and tagging.³⁰ Across El Salvador, aerosol takes over the streets (Figure 7). Yet because of its association with gang culture, the expression is rarely discussed. In the past decade, El Salvador has experienced pervasive gang violence with communities marked by graffiti that claims territory or asserts power. However, much of the country's graffiti culture is not gang-related, but amateur tagging. Increasingly there are highly artistic crews transforming decrepit walls into colorful renderings of design and imagination.

This movement speaks to a new generation of Salvadorans who were born after the Peace Accords. The themes and styles of post-war murals from their parents' generation do not always communicate the same values, struggles and realities that define contemporary youth culture. And with the globalization sharing frenzy spawned by the Internet, young artists are scoping out blogs to study international movements and techniques that reflect their own lived experience.

This experimentation, both good and bad, covers the country. In 2011, the rapid growth in graffiti prompted San Salvador's ARENA mayor, Norman Quijano, to form an anti-graffiti squad to clean up the capital's walls. In an interview with national newspaper, *La Página*, Quijano said, "We cannot permit the city to



Figure 7. Graffiti in downtown San Salvador, El Salvador. 2010. Aerosol spray. Photograph by the author, 2010.

remain stained with these negative expressions that increase the disorder and insecurity of our capital.”³¹ While many tags certainly deserve covering up, the squad also removed artful pieces by emerging collectives to the anger of young artists.

Both murals and graffiti require walls. Whereas murals in El Salvador have largely become celebrated, graffiti is seen as a subversive act that supposedly propagates violence and incivility. Yet, young people, artist collectives and even gangs are actively practicing their own form of historical memory. As oppressed and marginal groups, their formation of community is wrapped in visual culture and the public expression of identity — in much the same way that the FMLN adopted the wall to communicate historical memory and activism.

The erasure of and ignorance about graffiti in El Salvador can be reflected against a growing national industry of tourism. Promoting surf hubs and scenic hikes, public walls are becoming billboards for El Salvador’s tourism office with picturesque scenes spewing happiness into the streets. While some are explicitly advertisements, others are promoted as works of art. Often the latter become full of supposed folkloric scenes, such as animated cats dancing to non-referenced musical notes (Figure 8). While no one can deny these murals’ upbeat nature, they are also demeaning to national culture — disconnected from anything Salvadoran. While they may make visitors feel secure in a supposedly violent country, the



Figure 8. Unknown artist. *Concepción de Ataco, Ahuachapan*. 2011. Acrylic. Photograph by the author, 2012.

murals are entirely removed from any notion of historical memory or a collective cultural identity. In a similar vein, murals have been co-opted by non-profits and international partners as the go-to art project that builds community and bridges differences.

Ironically, murals, most likely due to Mexico's precedence, the continent's warm weather and the medium's stereotypical bright colors, have somehow become the Latin American art form — expected by tourists and, consequently, embraced by the right. Despite mostly good intentions, many recent mural projects often produce painted walls that hold no correlation with Salvadoran culture and history and, ultimately, no promise. They further underscore a critical failed component of the Community Mural Movement that began with powerful intentions, but that has been co-opted into a culture of happy-go-lucky murals that are disconnected from the political.

Viewing touristic murals alongside graffiti illustrates the public fight and determination to steer El Salvador's public image. These new forms of street art have become wrapped in a complex claim for ownership and ideals, and public walls have maintained their symbolic manifestation of generational, political and social divides.

POLITICAL COMMISSIONS AND CONTINUED WHITEWASHING

The newest and most provocative exploration of Salvadoran murals is their appropriation by prominent political figures, including those of the conservative right. In 2011, two monumental murals were commissioned for national Bicentennial celebrations. The first by President Mauricio Funes (FMLN) in the Anthropology Museum in San Salvador and the second by Norman Quijano, San Salvador's ARENA mayor, on the downtown streets.

The first tells the story of El Salvador from the point of view of nationally celebrated artist Antonio Bonilla. A former *guerrillero*, Bonilla produces work that is proudly left leaning and combines satirical and allegorical figures in bright hues (Figure 9). The mural, *Emancipación de El Salvador*, traces El Salvador's history from its indigenous roots, through the 1932 peasant revolt, toward the civil war and finally to contemporary struggles of immigration and violence. The first image Bonilla painted was Romero's face in the center of the composition surrounded by influential figures from the nation's history: the Jesuit martyrs, Roque Dalton, Prudencia Ayala. Located in the National Anthropology Museum, the mural is a direct exertion by President Funes to delineate Salvadoran history, claiming historical authenticity through its environment.

Norman Quijano's *Mural el Bicentenario* is also a historical narrative of El Salvador. The mural begins with an exact replica of the nation's independence document, followed by scenes of early colonial life and studies of historical



Figure 9. Antonio Bonilla. *Emancipación de El Salvador*. Museo Nacional de Antropología, San Salvador, San Salvador. 2011. Acrylic. Photograph by the author, 2011.

churches. Still in progress, the mural's last completed panel depicts the arrival of the printing press in El Salvador (Figure 10). Painted by Salvadoran artist José Alberto "Joalgar" Garcia and his team from Academy Tonatiu that includes disabled artists, the mural is impressive. In an interview, Joalgar stated that the intent was for Salvadorans passing by the mural to connect with the faces of the past and see their selves reflected.³² While the artistic intent is strong, the mural is aligned with a conservative memory of the nation's history. It focuses on the quest for independence, the flourishing of the Catholic Church and industrial innovation. If the mural ever reaches into the civil war era, many are curious as to what images Quijano will authorize to portray the armed conflict or indeed whether it will be portrayed at all.

In contrast to Funes' mural safely painted in the Anthropology Museum, Quijano's exists on one of San Salvador's busiest streets. Armed guards stand in front of the mural at all times to protect against vandalism. While armed guards are common outside residential communities or commercial businesses, such as pharmacies, malls or even high-end bakeries, this may be the only instance of armed security for public art in the country and speaks to the possibility of defacement.



Figure 10. Joalgar and Members of Academy Tonatiu. *Mural El Bicentenario*. San Salvador, San Salvador. 2011–13. Acrylic. Photograph by the author, 2011.

Viewing the murals together, the political fight to define Salvadoran history is evident. Each mural directly reflects its respected party's ideology in theme, style and iconography, using a didactic approach to propagate national sentiment. The projects also underscore how the mural has been embraced as the amiable and creative method to narrate national values, while simultaneously cleaning up the streets and connecting with younger generations. Despite these different interpretations of Salvadoran identity, mural painting has also contributed to shared understandings, with collective visual icons including indigenous traditions, folklore and national landscapes.

Even with this co-existence, the largest threat to Salvadoran murals remains in their political nature. Contemporary murals in keeping with the leftist post-war tradition are still abundant. And the common conservative slogan still proclaims, "*Borrón y cuenta nuevo*," with whitewashing remaining a common practice. No laws support preservation, leaving the responsibility of protection on individual communities. Moreover, as time progresses and individuals pass on, the campaign for and against historical memory has intensified.

Two critical examples of contemporary mural destruction underscore this fragility. In April 2010, Chicana muralist Judy Baca and her team from Social and Public Art Resource Center (S.P.A.R.C.) in Los Angeles were invited by the U.S. Embassy to paint murals with the community of La Concepción de Ataco, in

western El Salvador. They spent a week hosting workshops with Salvadoran youth and artists to create five murals based on the 2010 United Nations Millennium Development Goals: global warming, violence prevention and peaceful coexistence, rights to protect youth and children, gender equality and the development of citizens' responsibility.³³ The walls incorporated portraits of community residents, traditional Salvadoran landscapes and Pre-Columbian motifs — bold, bright colors filling the public space with projections of hope and celebration (Figure 11).

In January 2011, months after the paint had dried, Concepción de Ataco's mayor Oscar Oliverio Gomez ordered the murals dedicated to women's rights, indigenous roots and environmental activism, to be whitewashed.³⁴ In an interview with Salvadoran newspaper, *La Prensa Gráfica*, he said he would commission new murals to fill the walls, ones with, he says, "things from our culture, folklore, food and music; things that are joyful, that bring life and hope." He added, "We are not here to have themes of social resentment, hatred, class differences or the war. The war already happened."³⁵

In response to the whitewashing, S.P.A.R.C. condemned the act as a "witness to the erasure of memory" and "a silencing of the people's hope for the future," ending the statement by asking: "For what end and purpose would the powers that



Figure 11. Judy Baca and S.P.A.R.C. *Memorias de Ataco*. Concepción de Ataco, Ahuachapan. Industrial paint. 2010. Photograph by the author, 2012. (One of the two remaining murals.)

be want to deny the people of Ataco their own voice? Why replace the vision of a better future with the emptiness of white walls?”³⁶

The Ataco murals illustrate the continued tension embedded within public art in El Salvador. In Gomez’s eyes, the S.P.A.R.C. murals were not Salvadoran enough, too referential of El Salvador’s past and in contrast to ARENA’s political agenda. Today, the walls of the whitewashed murals are decorated with nature imagery and scenes of *finca* laborers happily working under the bright Salvadoran sun. The town itself is covered in touristic murals, as it promotes itself as a cultural haven in an impoverished and dangerous nation. Interestingly, the S.P.A.R.C. murals are just one block from Mayor Gomez’s office, whose walls act as an electoral billboard to ARENA. Party flags weave around the building and a portrait of Roberto D’Aubuisson, co-founder of the ARENA party and the man responsible for ordering the 1980 assassination of Romero, is included. These walls, a block away from one another, would have been a bi-partisan co-existence of political belief systems, perhaps interpreted as a statement to post-war peace. White-washing, however, was in many ways more fitting to Salvadoran politics.

The most famous act of public art destruction came at the end of 2012 when the Archbishop of San Salvador secretly ordered the removal of Fernando Llort’s celebrated mosaic on the façade of the San Salvador Cathedral. The mural was commissioned by the church following the 1992 Peace Accords in homage to the



Figure 12. Protest following the destruction of Fernando Llort’s Mosaic *Harmonía de mi Pueblo* (1997). Catedral Metropolitana de San Salvador. 2012. Photograph by the author, 2012.

Salvadoran people and depicted a symbolic portrayal of Christ's Last Supper. Without notifying the artist, government or public, the archbishop hired workers to remove the mural during the Christmas holidays — explaining that it was deteriorating, and thus hazardous to visitors.³⁷ A white drape was placed over the façade and the entire mosaic was removed overnight with the fragments purged.

San Salvador woke up to find its Cathedral naked of its famed mosaic. Demonstrations were organized, artists protested and journalists went to work with editorials (Figure 12). What at first made national headlines, however, soon faded from public discussion. No laws had been broken and the Church's actions could not be reversed. Months later the momentum of public outrage had diminished as Salvadorans were left with the reality that the country's most famous artist had his most famous work of art destroyed without notice, compensation or repercussion.

CONCLUSION

Twenty years ago, Salvadoran murals barely existed. Today, one of thousands may have been defaced. Somewhere between ephemerality and stability, is the basic recognition that Salvadoran murals exist and have existed. The interminable possibility of defacement underscores the political nature of contemporary Salvadoran murals. Pierre Nora writes, "*Lieux de mémoire* — sites of memory — only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications."³⁸ Salvadoran murals are not fixed; as artworks that exist in public space, they must invite debate. While perhaps upsetting, a tagged mural of Romero or whitewashed graffiti illustrate the competing histories expressed in public communication. These acts are a reminder of the politicized nature of space and public arts' function as an instrument to engage in civil discourse.

The danger in El Salvador, however, lies in the power structure that continues to exert control over what is allowed within the public sphere. When confronted with acts of defacement, one must ask what is being threatened: a debated history, or the right to express? The destruction of the Fernando Llorca mosaic and S.P.A.R.C. murals were not acts of dialogue, but exertions of power that date back to pre-war eras of censorship. These acts threaten not only coats of paint, but the very right to hold a paintbrush. The post-war mural campaign gave citizens a public voice — a right to speak openly, and a right to one's own memory. Murals were acts of resistance that sought to express collectivity, not exert impenetrable authority. Even when whitewashed, communities could always paint again. When that right is threatened, public space is endangered.

As the nation's conservative sector embraces mural painting (as it has every right to do), the populist power of the medium has inextricably lessened. The proliferation of murals for tourism and conservative propaganda directly subverts the influence mural painting once had and undermines its historical memory predisposition. Consequently, the only action remaining for the left is to keep painting.

Despite the growing movement and collectivization of mural painting in El Salvador since the close of the civil war, murals remain susceptible to dis-memory. Unless political consensus is reached, public walls in El Salvador will continue in a fragile state of debate and defacement and act as embodiments of the continued struggle to define and collectively agree upon a shared history and national identity.

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NOTES

¹ Eva Cockcroft, John Pitman Weber and James Cockcroft, *Toward a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement*, 2nd ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), xiv.

² Astrid Panamá Bahamond, *Procesos del arte en El Salvador* (San Salvador, El Salvador: Secretaría de Cultura de la Presidencia, Dirección de Publicaciones e Impresos, 2012), 30.

³ Bahamond, *Procesos del arte en El Salvador*, 75.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵ Isaías Mata, in conversation with the author, 17 Oct. 2011.

⁶ In the late 1970s, 10% of the landowners owned 78% of El Salvador's arable land; see Raymond Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy and El Salvador* (New York: Times Books, 1984), 16–17.

⁷ Citizens were largely inspired by the Second Vatican Council, U.S. Civil Rights Movement and socialist theory.

⁸ The F.M.L.N. is named after Salvadoran Farabundo Martí, who led a 1932 revolt against the military government that became a defining moment for the Salvadoran left.

⁹ Carlos "Santiago" Henríquez Consalvi, in conversation with the author, 7 Feb. 2012.

¹⁰ María Lopez Vigil, *Oscar Romero: Memories in Mosaic* (New York: Epica Task Force, 2000), 356.

¹¹ David Kunzle, *The Murals of Revolutionary Nicaragua: 1979–1992* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 6.

¹² This lack of victory, in many ways, creates a parallel between post-war Salvadoran murals and the murals of Northern Ireland. Related themes include martyrdom, the marking of sites and whitewashing.

¹³ Cruz Portal, e-mail correspondence with the author, 31 Jan. 2011.

¹⁴ This intense focus on remembrance has been passionately adopted into the imagery and rhetoric of the left as seen in the Introduction to Equipo Maíz's 1999 publication, *Images We Must Not Forget*: "The Peace Accords in 1992 asked for forgiveness, reconciliation and to forget. There can be forgiveness. There can be reconciliation. But there should also be justice, and never ever forgetting." In Edgar Romero, ed., *El Salvador, Imágenes para no olvidar, 1900–1999* (San Salvador: Asociación Equipo Maíz, 1999).

¹⁵ Elisabeth Jelin, *State Repression and the Struggles for Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xv.

¹⁶ Jelin, *State Repression and the Struggles for Memory*, 14.

¹⁷ During the civil war, Mata was a participant in the Chicano Mural Movement in San Francisco's Mission District. See Annice Jacoby, *Street Art San Francisco: Mission Muralismo* (New York: Abrams, 2009).

¹⁸ Cruz Portal, e-mail correspondence with the author, 31 Jan. 2011.

¹⁹ The use of Catholic iconography reflects the influence of Mexican Muralism, particularly Diego Rivera.

²⁰ Marilyn A. Zeitlan, *Art Under Duress: El Salvador 1980–Present* (Tempe: Arizona State University Art Museum, 1995), 15.

²¹ Isaías Mata, “La influencia de Monseñor Romero en las artes plásticas,” A.S.T.A.C. Blog, 29 May 2010. <http://astacultura.wordpress.com> (accessed 3 Mar. 2011).

²² In some instances, this also reflects the influence of the Mexican Mural tradition.

²³ The murals that do survive have been actively retouched by the local community or organizational partner, such as A.S.T.A.C.

²⁴ Kunzle, *Murals of Revolutionary Nicaragua*, 13.

²⁵ To illustrate, consider a response from former Salvadoran President Alfredo Cristiani (ARENA) when questioned about the massacre at El Mozote. His reply: “I think it’s better for the country if we don’t always look back.” In Mark Danner, *The Massacre of El Mozote* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 259.

²⁶ Nora, “Between History and Memory: Les Lieux de Mémoire.” *Representations* 26 (1989): 17–24.

²⁷ América “Dina” Argentina Vaquerano, in conversation with the author, 17 Feb. 2012.

²⁸ Claudia Verence Flores Escolero, in conversation with the author, 17 Feb. 2012.

²⁹ Used in this essay, graffiti can be defined as a drawing or stencil on a wall using aerosol spray.

³⁰ Tagging can be defined as the writing of one’s name on a wall.

³¹ “Alcaldía capitalina pone a trabajar a su unidad antigrafiti,” *La Pagina*, 22 Jul. 2011: 1. <http://www.lapagina.com.sv/ampliar.php?id=54215> (accessed 14 Sep. 2012).

³² José Alberto “Joalgar” García, in conversation with the author, 28 Oct. 2011.

³³ “El Salvador Murals in Ataco,” S.P.A.R.C. Murals, http://sparcmurals.org/ucla/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=90&Itemid=191 (accessed 21 May 2010).

³⁴ Gomez said, true or not, that he was responding to community desires, specifically those of the homeowners who gave their walls to the project.

³⁵ “Alcaldía borra tres murals en Ataco,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, 23 Jan. 2011. <http://www.laprensagrafica.com/el-salvador/departamentos/166659-alcaldia-borra-tres-murales-en-ataco> (accessed 9 Dec. 2011).

³⁶ “Murals in Ataco, El Salvador Whitewashed by Mayor,” S.P.A.R.C. Murals, Press Release, 19 Jan. 2011. http://www.sparcmurals.org/sparcone/images/stories/homepageImg/Ataco_SPARC_Press_Release_2011.pdf (accessed 12 Oct. 2011).

³⁷ Journalists immediately refuted this claim and the Archbishop has yet to publicly respond. Most believe it was destroyed because wealthy, conservative supporters of the Church found the mural plebian.

³⁸ Nora, “Les Lieux de mémoire,” 7–25.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Rachel Heidenry is a freelance writer and curator. Originally from St. Louis, Missouri, she is a graduate of Bard College in New York where she studied art history and human rights. In 2011, Heidenry began The El Salvador Mural Project, documenting mural art and graffiti on El Salvador’s walls. The project was funded by a 2011–2012 Fulbright Research Grant and sponsored by Centro Arte para La Paz in Suchitoto, El Salvador where an exhibition of her photographs opened in April 2012. Heidenry is currently creating an online resource for the study of Salvadoran mural painting. She resides in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and is the Research and Curatorial fellow at the Slought Foundation.